Gravity

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by StratsWrote, whiskeyandspite

Summary

They'd met young, and Fane had come a year later. Beautiful boy, with Nigel's eyes and Gabi's smile, but. He didn't meet the milestones kids his age should have met. He was pensive and quiet, he would react strangely to certain baby foods, spitting it out or refusing to open his mouth at all, or cry out, fighting the blankets they'd wrap him in after a bath. He had one toy he played with - a little wooden train he'd been teething on the wheel of as a baby, making it somewhat wonky when it rolled. The doctors suspected a developmental delay, autism maybe. Special care, special schools, learning new things, finding alternatives to things that normal kids wouldn't find difficult.

Recently-single dad Nigel feels in over his head trying to take care of his son, run a business, and keep them both sane. A chance meeting during a tantrum in the supermarket might just help him along.

Notes

For the A M A Z I N G Ish!
We had so much fun with these guys and cannot wait to write more (because oh yes, there will be more).

An ENORMOUS thank you to our beta reader Mel (asongtosaygoodbye) for being a boss, leaving the best comments, and kicking and taking names.

See the end of the work for more notes

Gabi had been gone for a week.

Nigel hadn't slept for five of those seven days, because Fane hadn't, calling for 'mama' and screaming in frustration when she didn't magically appear. It wasn't that he didn't like Nigel, his 'papa' was just as often called for, but he was *there* now, and mama wasn't, and it made no sense.

Pre-k was nearly impossible - Fane was having a harder time than usual, and Nigel had found himself back and forth from school more often than not soothing him or just picking him up and taking him home to save everyone the nerves.

Nigel had eventually just taken the entire week off work, bluetooth headset in his ear the whole time in case someone inevitably needed something. You'd think a bar would damn near run itself without help, but no, take away the lynchpin and suddenly everything was collapsing in on itself. Lights weren't working, beer hadn't been delivered on time and a few kegs were dry before a busy Friday night.

He smoked more. He hid the alcohol in the house in progressively to harder to reach places to avoid downing entire bottles at a time, and once found a particularly annoying lounge cushion and screamed into it when Fane was down for a nap and wouldn't hear him. He wasn't holding it together very well. Gabi hadn't been, either, which was why she'd left in the end. But he couldn't help feeling that it had been a particularly selfish move on her part.

They'd met young, and Fane had come a year later. Beautiful boy, with Nigel's eyes and Gabi's smile, but. He didn't meet the milestones kids his age should have met. He was pensive and quiet, he would react strangely to certain baby foods, spitting it out or refusing to open his mouth at all, or cry out, fighting the blankets they'd wrap him in after a bath. He had one toy he played with - a little wooden train he'd been teething on the wheel of as a baby, making it somewhat wonky when it rolled. The doctors suspected a developmental delay, autism maybe. Special care, special schools, learning new things, finding alternatives to things that normal kids wouldn't find difficult.

They'd moved cities for Fane. Turned their entire lives upside down. Nigel would do it a thousand more times, if he had to, but he guessed Gabi hadn't felt the same. Nigel had thought it was a lot when they were in it together. Now everything seemed to have doubled. Speech therapy on Tuesdays. Occupational therapy on Thursdays. Remember that the pre-K doesn't allow peanut butter. Remember that the only thing Fane will eat for lunch is either a peanut butter sandwich (no crusts) or deli slices of turkey (no sandwich). Fuck up twice in three days. Get the wrong brand of weird squeezy applesauce pouch things. Get the wrong brand of nighttime pull-ups. Try to convince Fane that it's not the wrong brand. Hold Fane while he sobs because you tried to make him wear them anyway.

Nigel was tired. Fane was tired. The pre-k teacher had started gently suggesting they try a new therapist. Nigel considered gently suggesting she try a new career. What did they even need pre-k for anyway? The kids would learn their numbers and letters and shit in kindergarten.

Well, most of the kids.

“Mih.” Fane demanded, banging his empty sippy cup on Nigel’s thigh. He’d chewed the lid of this one all to hell, too. Add it to the shopping list.

“Yeah, buddy, I gotcha.” Nigel scooped Fane up, slightly rejuvenated when Fane rested his head on Nigel’s shoulder with a sigh.

The problem was, ‘mih’ did not necessarily mean ‘milk.’ It could mean any kind of beverage, and there was always the possibility that Nigel could get it wrong. He hadn’t been home as much in the evenings, and he wasn’t quite as good at figuring out the puzzle as Gabi had been.

“Alright, kiddo,” he said, setting Fane down in front of the fridge, “What do you want to drink?”

“Yeah,” Fane told him. Nigel sighed. It had been worth a shot.

“Do you want juice?”

“Yeah.”

“What kind of juice?”

“Mih.”

Nigel pulled out two hefty bottles of juice from the fridge, setting them on the counter with the pictures facing out. “We’ve got orange and grape.”

Fane studied both bottles for a long moment, before turning to whack Nigel with the cup again. “Mih.”

“Gotcha.” Nigel took the cup and picked the orange juice, because it was closest. “Can you say ‘please?’”

“Pe.”

“Close enough.”

At least orange had turned out to be a good call. Fane drank, alternating between chewing the sippy and sucking from it, but contented. Contented enough that Nigel could get a few more things done without his attention being drawn away.

Nigel loved his kid. He adored him. He had from the first moment Gabi held him and told Nigel he was theirs. He loved him even when Fane was crying, he loved him even when Fane kept him awake. He’d taken on more diaper changing duties than even Gabi had, and had only stayed at work because they needed one steady income at the very least and he owned his own business.

But even with all that love, he would get frustrated. Frustrated that they couldn't understand each other. Frustrated that Gabi had left a note - a fucking *note* - and vanished and didn't answer her damn phone when Nigel had endlessly tried to reach her. Frustrated that he couldn't keep this up, he knew he couldn't, not on his own, and not knowing where to turn to for help. There were three loads of laundry waiting to be done and one waiting to be folded, because Gabi hadn't set the machine before she left, and she usually did. There was absolutely no food in the house to last them another day and Nigel missed the cut off to book a delivery for the morning.

He'd have to go in, and Fane would have to go with him. And they had to be back before baththime or else Fane's entire internal schedule would be thrown off and he would panic.

He'd get the basics. Just enough to tide them over so he could book a full delivery for the day after and avoid the crowded supermarket with Fane for as long as possible. It was mid-week and early evening and surely it wouldn't be too crowded now. Nigel forced himself to relax so Fane wouldn't feel the tension in him. Fane had his train, absently turning the wheels over and over with the tip of his finger, eyes set in deep concentration as he did.

Good.

Something to keep his mind off of everything else.

He grabbed the diaper bag first. Fane was *mostly* accident free, but Nigel still stuffed the thing full of snacks and juice boxes and whatever other nonsense he could shove into it. Diaper bag, keys, shoes. Fane's lit up. Half the time Nigel had to carry him if he wanted to get anywhere on time. This, apparently, was right on schedule with the rest of his peers.

"Hey, buddy. Wanna help me put your shoes on?" Nigel crouched down in front of him, holding out the velcro sneakers. Fane didn't answer him, too focused on his train. "Fane. *Fane*. Stephan!" Gently, Nigel gripped Fane's chin and turned him so they were face to face. Fane made a disgruntled noise.

"We need to put your shoes on. It's time to go grocery shopping."

"No," Fane told him. Of the handful of words he knew, that one he had learned quickly and clearly.

"You can bring your train with you," Nigel tried, letting go of Fane's face in favor of his tiny socked foot.

"No," Fane said again, no longer paying attention. He was distracted enough that Nigel managed to get him ready and out the door with only one frustrated growl from each of them, thankfully, and before long, they were pulling into the parking lot of the closest grocery store Nigel could find.

"Alright!" Nigel said, in that overly-cheerful voice people always seemed to use with small children. "Ready to go pick out some snacks?"

Fane looked up at him from the seat of the shopping cart, train clutched tightly in his hand. “No.”

Nigel sighed.

They needed fruit. They need *actual* milk. Some bread, peanut butter, eggs… Nigel grabbed bacon and chicken and turkey from the deli as he passed it, quick in his movements, uncaring if he was choosing the cheapest options or not, he had no *time*. Carrots and mayo. A dozen beers. The right pull-ups. And cigarettes, he needed cigarettes.

He tried to make the cart as fun as he could for Fane, making sure he was looking around, or looking at him, or looking at his train and not distracted by the announcements overhead. He’d forgotten his headphones. Again. Fuck.

The cart nudged a display shelf and sent some bags of peanuts cascading to the floor, which Nigel dove for with a curse so as not to draw attention to it. He did well enough, nothing had burst open, but when he looked up again Fane’s face was contorted in the first harrowing signs of a scream.

“Buddy, what’s wrong?” He tried. “Fane?”

Fane shrieked, loud and long. It had been building, Nigel knew, since they walked in, but he’d tried so hard to head it off.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay.” Nigel grabbed for Fane’s hands. “It’s alright, I know it’s noisy, but we’re almost done. Fane-”

Too late. He’d let it build too long. Fane was inconsolable, shaking his head, rocking his little body in the cart. He smacked at Nigel when he tried to take his hands, whacking him hard across the arm with his toy train. Nigel hissed; it would bruise badly later.

People were staring. People always stared when this happened, stared and muttered, but they didn’t fucking *help*, did they? Some asshole down the aisle was muttering about temper tantrums. Temper tantrums would have been easier, at least then Nigel would have known he was the only one suffering, rather than Fane being unable to tell him what was wrong. He scooped Fane out of the seat, which only seemed to make it worse. Fane screamed like he’d been lit on fire, kicking his feet frantically against Nigel’s stomach, until he began to slip down in Nigel’s arms.

“Here.”

A man had come up pushing an empty cart. “Put him in here.” He pointed to the large basket instead of the seat. Nigel stared at him.

“What the *fu*-”

“It’s loud,” the man said. He didn’t meet Nigel’s eyes when he spoke, distracted, maybe, by Fane. “It’s loud and it’s bright and there isn’t much that can make that better, but we can reduce it.”

Fane had kicked off one of his shoes. It bounced along several feet to land somewhere behind the stranger. Desperate, Nigel put him in the cart.

“Your coat,” The man demanded, laying his own across the top. Nigel handed it over. Together, they managed to make a small pocket of shadow inside the cart. Fane was still screaming, kicking at the wires, but the man began to push the cart forward.

“Where do you think-”

“It’s quiet and cool towards the back by the milk. He needs time to process.”

Nigel cursed, ducked to take up Fane’s little shoe, and followed; their own cart forgotten for the moment. Unimportant. All that mattered was that his son was distressed and someone was trying to help and Nigel wanted to break down and cry like he hadn’t in many, many years.

He’d been right, the stranger, the fridges that housed the milk were off to the side of the store, and while the announcements and tendrils of music still reached here, it was far less peopled and a little darker than where Fane had lost it. Nigel stood beside the cart, unsure if he should touch his kid or leave him be, unsure if he should thank the man or hug him. Unsure of anything, really, beyond the fact that somehow, slowly, Fane’s screaming was quieting.

“How did you know?” Nigel asked after a while, because standing awkwardly holding a toddler’s shoe while said toddler continued to cry out in a jacket hammock was awkward enough without the silence.

“Helps me too sometimes,” the stranger replied, looking up at Nigel and almost through him. That look was familiar. “I’ve tried to petition the store to have quiet hours for shoppers with sound and light sensitivity but they don’t seem to care. They never really do, though, so I’m not sure why I’m surprised at all.”

Nigel swallowed, gesturing unnecessarily to his son. “Yeah he… sometimes he just can’t handle it. And can’t say anything to let me know so I don’t know what to do to help. It’s hard, it’s so *fucking* hard not knowing how to help your own goddamn kid.”

His voice broke and Nigel turned away. Now he’d not only embarrassed himself in front of the entire store but shown his incompetence as a dad. CPS would be on him like vultures before he even reached the car with Fane.

“Sorry,” he muttered. “You don’t need that shit. Thank you. Thanks for… that. For this.”

“You’re welcome,” the man said. He looked back to Fane thoughtfully. “My father carried a blanket when I was small, to wrap me up and block out outside stimulus. Too little contact can be uncomfortable, but the encompassing pressure of a blanket is relaxing.”

Nigel had noticed that. When Fane was upset, all Nigel wanted was to pick him up and hold him, but if he was already screaming that usually just made it worse.

Fane was quiet, now. When Nigel peeked at him fully, he had Nigel’s jacket sleeve pressed up against his face, rubbing in slow circles. He was sucking his thumb, too, which Gabi had

sworn up and down he'd stopped doing. He looked tired. Nigel would be tired too, after all that fuss.

"What else?" Nigel found himself saying, turning back towards the man. He looked taken aback.

"What… else?"

"What else helps you? What else sets you off? I can't…" Nigel took in a deep breath. "It's just me. Just me and Fane, and I don't have a *clue*-" He was just making himself look bad. Nigel shook his head, trying to find words that didn't make him look like a complete idiot. "It's really hard to do this by yourself. With any kid."

"I have to get my shopping done," The man said, looking rapidly between Nigel and Fane. "I have to get my shopping done, or else I'll be late to eat dinner, and then everything else will be late."

"Oh," Nigel said. He knew an excuse when he heard one, and he turned back to Fane, who allowed himself to be picked up now. "Sorry we bothered you."

"I could talk to you more another time."

"Another t- oh. *Oh*. Yes, fuck, yes that would be great. Sorry, hold on." he balanced Fane on his hip, careful to cradle him properly so he wouldn't lose his train. He was still stroking Nigel's jacket, eyes red-rimmed and wet but back to concentrating. Nigel finally yanked out his phone.

"I don't like phones," the man admitted. Nigel licked his bottom lip into his mouth and shrugged.

"No phones. Uh. The supermarket's not exactly the most popular place. You could come over?"

Inside, Nigel was kicking himself. Inviting a total stranger to his house to talk about his kid when they'd met in the supermarket, screaming. Well, *Nigel* hadn't been screaming. He'd been close to screaming. And the stranger hadn't been screaming -

Just.

He was making an absolute fool of himself.

"I can do that," the man replied. "I do better face to face. I'll write your address down."

A notebook came out, a little pencil to match, and Nigel numbly dictated his address, watched it appear in pretty penmanship just above the line of the notebook rather than directly on it.

"I'm Nigel, by the way," he managed, holding out a hand that was predictably not taken, though it was scrutinized sufficiently. "Thanks for helping me with Fane, again, I really appreciate it."

“Adam,” the other replied, blinking at Nigel’s hand before looking at the little boy pressed to his shoulder. He was quiet for a moment, as though lost in thought, then seemed to almost physically snap into himself. “I have to go, I’ll be late for dinner. I can come tomorrow between two and three, I have some time then.”

“Thank you.” Nigel said again, watching Adam take his empty cart back and wheel it deeper into the store. Nigel stood a moment longer, feeling the sleepy weight of his son against him, before turning to look at Fane.

“Ready to go home, buddy?” He asked. Fane blinked at him, and mumbled around his thumb, ‘no’.

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Nigel didn’t have work and Fane didn’t have school. One would think that would give Nigel plenty of time to clean up the disaster the house had become, but that person probably didn’t have a moody toddler.

“Papa,” Fane said, interrupting Nigel’s third attempt to pick up the living room. Fane mostly only played with his little train, but he still went through the typical moments of ‘dump all the toys onto the floor in case there was something better you forgot about.’

“Yeah, bud?” Nigel asked, giving up entirely on the stupid plastic food.

Fane did not seem to have an actual answer. Once he had Nigel’s attention, he seemed perfectly content. He flopped over on the floor beside Nigel’s feet, rolling his train unevenly over the carpet.

“Good talk, buddy.”

It was more of the same when Nigel attempted laundry or dishes. Fane would decide he wanted a drink, or a snack, or just to be directly in the spot Nigel was trying to be in. He’d always been loving, regardless of what any of Gabi’s books had to say about ‘attachment issues,’ but he’d become downright clingy in the past few days.

“Fane. Buddy. Kiddo. *Stephan*.” Fane continued to run his train directly over Nigel’s feet, as if he hadn’t spoken at all. “I *have* to get some of this done, before-”

The doorbell rang. Nigel groaned. So did Fane. “Before *that*.”

Well.

At least the place looked like just one bomb had hit it, rather than several. Nigel grabbed up the dishtowel and wiped his hands as he strode to the door and worked it open. He set his foot out against the jamb, about a foot off the ground, in case Fane decided to make a break for it; he didn’t do it often, but he was very fast when the thought hit him to try.

“Adam,” he said, finding that his smile, at least, was genuine. “Thanks for this. Sorry about the mess. Come in. Did you want a drink or something?”

“No, thank you.” Adam squeezed through the space Nigel allotted him, looking around curiously. “Hello again, Fane,” he said to the pair of eyes peeking shyly around the doorway to the kitchen. The eyes disappeared.

“Sorry,” Nigel said. “He knows you’re talking to him, he’s not- He’s a smart kid, his speech therapist told us he understands a lot more than he can respond to. He’s just… shy.”

“I’m new,” Adam said. “I’m unfamiliar, and much bigger than him. It’s understandable.” He followed Nigel out to the dining room table, taking the seat Nigel offered him. Fane wandered in a moment later, reluctant to be far from Nigel.

“Papa,” he said, crawling under the table to run his train over Nigel’s feet again.

“Yeah, Fane?” But Fane had wanted nothing more than acknowledgement, and didn’t answer. Nigel turned back to Adam, who had pulled out a notebook. There were already a few notes scribbled down. Nigel felt a bit like he was being evaluated.

“You asked me what else helped me, or bothered me, but those are very broad topics, and Fane and I are different people. If you tell me more about him, I can offer suggestions, but I can’t promise that everything I suggest will work.” Adam looked up at Nigel expectantly, tapping his pen against the page. Nigel noticed, once again, that his gaze was ever so slightly off.

“Uh,” Nigel cleared his throat, folded his hands on the table before thinking better of it and lowering them to his lap instead. “Well, he’s four. They think he has a developmental delay because he hasn’t picked up on speech as quick as the other kids, but he’s not stupid.” Adam just blinked, no judgement. That made Nigel feel a little better. “Can’t answer questions too well, but he’s getting there. We’re working to understand each other, we usually get it. He doesn’t really uh,” Nigel sighed, ducking his head to watch his son, he moved the train over the exact same path, again and again, perfectly contented.

“He eats certain things and doesn’t eat others. He’s particular. He sleeps well and naps well but when he’s overwhelmed he won’t go near me. Sometimes he doesn’t scream he just,” Nigel gestured, a vague flap of his hands. “Other times he won’t leave my side. He’s been a velcro kid since his mum walked out -”

He held his breath a moment before releasing it with a groan. “You don’t need that story, never mind. It was about ten days ago and he’s… I don’t know how to explain to him what happened. I don’t even fucking know what happened.”

Adam tilted his head to the side, taking it all in. “My mother died when I was eight,” he offered, “I’m not sure I was old enough to understand it then. But I did when I was older. And I had my father, so I didn’t have to deal with it alone.” He looked down at his paper. It seemed more for show than anything else, he’d started doodling tiny, endless circles in the top corner, a constant fidget while his focus was on Nigel.

“Many four-year-olds are particular,” Adam continued, “But for me, the particularities tended to be based in tactile sensations. The things he won’t eat, do they have textures in common? Or textures that are particularly unique?”

Nigel thought about it for a moment. “Scrambled eggs,” he said slowly, “He’ll pat them with his hands but he won’t put them in his mouth. Peas. Beans of any kind.”

“Grainy textures,” Adam pointed out, “And scrambled eggs feel rubbery for me. They were an acquired taste.”

There were more, Nigel remembered, but as he thought about them, he felt like he could pinpoint exactly what was off about each food. “He’s the same with clothes,” he continued, feeling slightly more confident now. “We have to let him touch everything in the store, otherwise we might come home with something that will lead to a fight later.”

“Involving him in decisions can be helpful. Fane will feel like he has more control, and you will not have to worry as much.”

Throughout this discussion, Fane had been creeping closer to Adam. Possibly, he’d picked up on the fact that the conversation was about him. More likely, he was hoping to *make it* about him. He stood on tiptoes by the edge of the table, watching Adam’s pen move with some fascination. He reached for it, stomping his foot when Adam moved it gently out of reach.

“Uhn!” Fane demanded. “Papa!”

It was not Nigel he was speaking to. He flushed, hastily pulling Fane back over to him. “I’m so sorry about that, he calls all men that. And all women are mama.”

Adam did not seem offended. On the contrary, he was looking between Fane and Nigel with a thoughtful frown. “Have you taught him any sign language?”

“I… wouldn’t that be really complicated for him if English is confusing?”

Adam shook his head. “It uses a different part of the brain than spoken language does, it’s more tactile, kinesthetic. You don’t have to give him advanced classes, but a few words might make communication easier.”

Nigel nodded, stroking a hand through Fane’s hair as the boy looked at Adam still. He was turning the chewed-up wheel on his train.

“Does he fixate on things?” Adam asked, Nigel blinked.

“I… yeah I guess. Loves his train, he won’t play with anything else for weeks at a time and if, god forbid, we lose that thing somewhere in the house…”

“Puzzles are good,” Adam said. “Gives him quiet time and space to work on his own. Sit with him if you like, but let him work through it himself. And cut the tags off his clothes,” Adam added, apropos to nothing. “They itch sometimes, it can get really irritating, especially when he can’t reach back and adjust them on his own.”

Nigel nodded, mentally took it all in. Fane was still watching Adam openly, he would either look too directly at people or not at all, he hadn’t learned yet what it meant to not stare. But Adam didn’t mind. He didn’t meet Fane’s eyes but he didn’t ignore him, once in a while

looking his way, or at the toy in his hand. Nigel let him free to wander again as they kept talking and Fane approached Adam curiously, but didn't touch him.

Nigel realized, absently, that outside of medical staff and therapists, no one had been to their house since Fane had been diagnosed.

On the hour of three, on the dot, Adam closed his notebook, apologized for needing to go, and stood. He accepted Nigel's invitation to come over the next week, same time, to help him with Fane more.

"Or just for coffee."

"I don't drink coffee," Adam told him, and Nigel snorted, shaking his head. Of course he didn't.

"No coffee, then."

"I like tea," Adam offered, as close to an olive branch as he could manage before leaving. Nigel grabbed it with both hands.

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"You used to program *voices* into *dolls*?" Nigel shook his head, leaning back in his chair until it was balancing on two legs. "Shit, Adam, you're a genius."

"Technically my IQ borders that which would be considered genius."

"I didn't say you were a literal genius," Nigel pointed out, grinning when Adam blushed.

Today had been a relatively good day. Fane hadn't stopped looking for Mama, but the frequency had decreased. Nigel had managed to remember what he would and wouldn't eat for lunch, *and* he'd gotten him down for a nap without too much fuss.

Adam had brought books with him. Some, he'd said, had been his fathers and were probably outdated. The baby sign language book, however, was a godsend.

"You'll be lucky if you can teach *me* half of this," Nigel told him.

"Children are mimics," Adam said, walking him through the sign for "hungry" one more time: a hand curled into a C shape and then moved down the chest. "They like motion. They like to copy. They like when they've gotten something correct. And they like to be understood," He added. "The communication barrier between Fane and the rest of the world is no doubt just as frustrating for him."

Nigel had figured that much out for himself, after too many wrong guesses about drinks and snacks. "I really can't thank you enough for this, Adam," he said softly.

"It's been really interesting bringing all this back again," Adam replied, for a moment unaware that Nigel was just sitting back and watching him, letting his eyes move over his face, his neck, to the rumpled collar of his shirt. "I remember a lot more than I thought I did."

Nigel's lips pressed together in an amused smile. "What do you do outside of work? Besides help wayward parents."

"I don't -" Adam saw the smile, the relaxed body language. He felt himself smile back. "I don't get a lot of time free."

"But when you do."

"I like to read," Adam offered, flipping through the book to find another word that would be useful for Fane. "I stargaze, sometimes. The observatory is amazing here, have you ever been?" Nigel shook his head slowly. Adam's smile widened. "It's wonderful going the first time, especially if you don't know what to expect. I almost envy you that, I still remember the first time I went to see -"

"Do you want to go with me?"

"What?"

"To the observatory," Nigel clarified. "When you have the time."

Adam's blushed, just a hint of pink to his cheeks. Just enough for Nigel to know he had not been entirely off the mark. Then Adam straightened himself out, found his cool, collected center again. "Fane might enjoy it. They have a planetarium show, although we'd have to go early. Children under five are free, but only allowed in for the first show of the day."

"Early's better anyway," Nigel told him, "That way we could grab some lunch and get Fane home in time for a nap."

Adam nodded. "There are exhibits as well, plenty of things to do and see, although I don't know how much will be appropriate for a child Fane's age…" He was growing more animated as he thought about it, eyes bright. Nigel reached for his hand, an impulse he couldn't quell in time.

Adam looked down at their hands, Nigel's over his on the table. Slowly, he turned his hand until he was palm up, Nigel's fingers locking gently around his wrist. "I would really like to go to the observatory with you and Fane, Nigel," he said softly.

Nigel smiled at him, wide, hopeful. It had been weeks, months now, since he'd reached out to another person and had them reach back. Adam's hand was soft, without the rough callouses Nigel's bore. "It's a date."

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It was a good day. Clear and sunny, and Fane was in a cuddly mood. He'd grinned at Nigel when he'd woken him up, had signed 'drink' while asking Nigel for 'mih', and let Nigel dress him without a fuss.

They met Adam by the door and drove to the observatory - he was greeted with a joyful shriek of '*papa!*' - and made their way in. Nigel bought the tickets while Adam and Fane stood aside, looking at the models on display. Adam spoke quietly, seemingly uncaring when Fane looked away or fiddled with his toy or didn't look at the display at all. If Adam stopped speaking, Fane immediately turned to him again, expectant.

Gabi and Nigel had tried to take Fane to public things before, with varying results. It honestly depended on his mood that day, on what the environment was like. Nigel made sure to get seats at the end of a row, so they could make a quick exit should the experience prove less than enjoyable.

But once they settled, and the lights dimmed, Fane reached out to take Nigel's finger to hold and *looked*. The narrator spoke slowly and clearly, the volume wasn't too loud, and the display of stars and galaxies, aurora and planets had Fane enthralled. Nigel had never seen him so engaged, his chest tightened with pride and pleasure and something else entirely, when he glanced to his other side and saw Adam just as immersed, a smile of childish wonder on his face.

When the show ended and the lights went back up, Fane turned to Nigel, practically vibrating in his seat. He held up his hands, fingers held together like the mouths of sock puppets, and brought his hands together over and over again.

"More?" Nigel asked, ruffling Fane's hair. Fane made the sign more eagerly, until it less resembled sign language and more extremely aggressive clapping. Nigel laughed, scooping Fane up from his seat.

"They have a live image of the sun?" Adam suggested as they walked, "And a sculpture of the Milky Way galaxy. Would you like to see more stars, Fane?"

Fane wriggled in Nigel's arms, making the sign for 'more' again, this time towards Adam.

"Stars," Adam told him. He made two fists with his index fingers extended, and then rubbed his hands against each other, fingers jabbing repetitively towards the ceiling. This new word thrilled Fane to no end. He mimicked it clumsily the entire way downstairs, until he nearly poked Nigel in the eye and they had to redirect him.

Most of the exhibits were beyond Fane's level of comprehension, but he loved the hanging models of planets and the sculpture of the Milky Way. More than that, he liked hearing Adam explain it all to him, following him around like a duckling, making the sign for 'more' every time Adam paused for a breath.

Nigel was certain Fane only understood about a third of what Adam was saying (Nigel himself could barely follow some of it), but the ability to have the adults around him understand what he wanted had brought a new spring to Fane's step. Any time he signed something and Adam or Nigel responded positively, he brightened.

They evaded the gift shop carefully. Nigel's budget had tightened now that he had to put Fane in daycare while he worked, and he wasn't entirely sure Fane wouldn't discover something he liked as much as his train.

“Lunch?” Nigel offered to Adam, as they stepped back out into the sun, “My treat.”

Adam was a little out of breath, growing as excited as Fane was talking about the stars and space and the technology involved. Nigel felt like he was taking two kids to lunch, with the vibrating enthusiasm around him.

“Yes please,” Adam agreed, grinning. Fane signed his agreement, and leaned into Nigel as he carried him back to the car.

They didn’t drive far, just enough to be able to comfortably park near a place that wasn’t overflowing with people. It was coming on to midafternoon now, the lunch rush had ebbed. They settled outside, with Fane climbing up into a seat next to Adam rather than Nigel, watching him curiously even when he said nothing at all.

A few moments of passive deliberation found Fane very interested in a peanut butter sandwich and some actual milk, which took little convincing when he signed the word himself to the absolutely charmed waitress. He ate slowly, as though all his concentration was needed to make this happen, and Nigel left him to it, turning, finally, to Adam again.

“So how did this space thing start?” he asked. “You know everything there is to know, they should pay you to give tours.”

Adam smiled down at his own sandwich, shrugging. “I’ve been interested for as long as I can remember. I grew up in New York City, and whenever my father had trouble getting me to sleep, he’d take me out to Central Park and we would lay in the grass together and look up at the stars. He liked mythology, and he would tell me stories about the constellations.”

Glancing over at Fane, Adam frowned slightly. “When my mother died,” he said, “Dad got me a telescope and a library card. There was a lot going on at the time, and it was… difficult to get me out from underfoot. So we’d check out as many books on space as I could carry, and I would spend hours learning everything I could. I have a very good memory.”

“I noticed,” Nigel said, “I don’t think I remember what I had for *breakfast*.”

“You had toast,” Adam told him, “It was still in your mouth when I met you at your house.”

Nigel rolled his eyes, grinning. “Anyone ever tell you you’ve got a smart mouth, too?”

“On a regular basis from the time I learned to talk,” Adam replied dryly, but he was smiling too. This time, it was his hand that reached for Nigel’s, a hesitant brush of fingers over the back of Nigel’s wrist.

When Nigel went to twine their fingers together, however, they were interrupted by a loud shriek of pure joy, as Fane dumped the remainder of his milk onto a caterpillar crawling across the table, and therefore everyone else’s food.

By the time the milk was soaked up and the caterpillar had made its soggy way off the table, Fane was yawning, reaching to tug Adam’s sleeve and rubbing his eyes. Nigel stood to grab him, only to be met with a firm ‘no’.

“Come on, buddy, we’ll go to the car and head home.”

“No,” Fane repeated, tugging Adam’s sleeve a little harder before looking to him. “Papa.”

Ah.

Nigel gave Adam an apologetic look. “I think he’s chosen you as his mode of transportation to the car.”

Adam’s cheeks flushed, and he turned his head to look at the little boy who was watching him with enormous eyes and the kind of trust only little children carry. He knew Fane generalized all males he met as ‘papa’, Nigel had told him, and Adam understood the concept. But there was something warm and nice about being referred to that way by the son of someone Adam had grown to really like. A lot.

He settled Fane against his hip as he stood, and the little boy immediately nuzzled his face into Adam’s neck and sighed, entirely relaxed and content.

It wasn’t a long walk to the car, nor was it a long one from the car to the house, where Adam carried a now half-asleep Fane to his bedroom and helped Nigel put him down for a nap.

Usually by this point, Nigel felt like he could use a nap as well, but there was a strange sort of jitteriness in his body, a thrum of anticipation that he couldn’t seem to quell.

They sat a foot apart on the couch, the TV off, and for a moment it seemed like they were going to return to their earlier conversation. But then Adam tilted his head, and a lock of hair fell free across his forehead, and wow, Nigel hadn’t been this gone over someone in *years*.

Adam’s cheek was soft where Nigel’s hand cupped it, flushed vaguely pink, and when Nigel slotted their lips together he made a quiet little noise that Nigel would never be able to forget.

“Your wife,” Adam murmured when Nigel pulled back.

“Never married,” Nigel told him, “And she lost the right to complain, anyway, when she walked out.”

“Oh.” Adam’s gaze flickered over Nigel’s face, from the fringe falling into eyes to the stubble that was just starting to grow in. Then he leaned forward and kissed Nigel again.

It was Nigel, this time, who made the noise. Damn near helpless as Adam opened his mouth and let him in, if he were standing his knees would have given out at this point. He wrapped his free arm around Adam and drew him closer, pulling back just long enough to catch a breath before kissing him again.

It wasn’t frantic, not really, but it was desperate. A culmination of patience and stress and wanting that had stretched between the two of them unspoken but felt for weeks. Nigel had always been partial to both genders. He’d been faithful to Gabi their entire life together but he had missed this; the different strength and power that came with kissing a man, holding him, feeling his arousal as obvious and clear as your own against your thigh.

Nigel grinned as Adam pressed closer, slid his hands to his hips to guide Adam into a straddle over him, groaning when Adam immediately rolled their hips together. He laughed, head back against the couch, eyes hooded as he watched Adam.

“I didn’t think you’d -” he licked his lips, laughed again. “I would’ve tried sooner. Been thinking about this for weeks.”

“You should have,” Adam said, breathless, “I would have let you.”

“Well, I know that *now*,” Nigel said, grinning against Adam’s mouth when he moved in for another kiss.

Adam liked Nigel, liked him so much that it felt a little scary at times. And this, Nigel’s hands on his hips, Nigel arching up into him until they touched in every place they could, this was exactly what Adam had hoped it would be.

“How long do we have?” Adam gasped, Nigel’s hand sliding slow to cup his ass.

Nigel paused, then cursed, tucking his head against Adam’s shoulder. “Not long enough,” he muttered, his voice muffled by the distracting way his lips grazed Adam’s throat

“We should stop, then.”

“We should,” Nigel agreed, but his hands didn’t move from where he held on to Adam.

“Nigel,” Adam said gently. Nigel sighed, hoisting Adam off his lap and depositing him back on the couch.

He didn't stop kissing him though, leaning over to press his lips to Adam's cheek, his jaw, under it when Adam lifted his chin. He pulled away with a laugh when Adam shoved him playfully, turning his head to nuzzle Adam instead, resting his head on Adam's shoulder.

"I really want this to work," Nigel said after a while, spreading his fingers when Adam's hand sought his own. "With us. You and me. But I'm a package deal, and that often… complicates things."

He hadn't thought it ever would. He hadn't thought Gabi would walk out and leave them like this. He hummed and turned his nose against Adam's hair as he squeezed their hands together.

"You've been a lifesaver with Fane," Nigel told him. "I don't know how I could ever fucking thank you enough for that." He smiled, kissed his skin. "And I can't ask you to take that on, I know how goddamn hard it is, but…"

He sighed again, bringing Adam's hand to his lips to kiss his knuckles. "I really want this to work. I want to try."

Adam had never considered children before. He hadn’t thought he’d be very good at it. His understanding of Fane was rooted mostly in his understanding of himself, and getting in to his father’s bookshelves growing up.

Adam adored Fane, though. It surprised him how easily they'd attached to each other. Adam wanted to see Fane grow, to see him learn and change and get excited about things.

"I want this to work too," Adam told Nigel, "I like you. I like *Fane*. I don't care if it's complicated, Nigel, I want to try."

Nigel's smile was overwhelming. He kissed Adam again, and again, over and over until they finally heard little feet stomping down the hall and had to stop.

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After that conversation, Adam came around a lot more often. Nigel knew how hard it was for Adam to make major changes to his schedule, and he appreciated how much effort he was putting into seeing them.

Fane was *thrilled*. He'd started associating the doorbell with Adam's visits, running for the door yelling for 'papa.'

"Adam, kiddo," Nigel said gently, "Say 'Adam.'"

"Ahm," Fane mimicked doubtfully. Then he turned back to Adam, making the sign for 'up' and repeating both the sign and an audible 'papa' until Adam picked him up.

Now that Fane could communicate easier, with his signing, with the patience they both provided him by listening and trying to understand, he was less frustrated. Once in a while, of course, emotions overwhelmed him, or he was having a fussy day, but compared to the mental state both he and Nigel had been in when Adam met them, they were genuinely happy now.

He hadn't progressed far verbally, though he was more interested in repeating words than he had been before. He still had his very special train, but more and more Fane would sign the word for 'star' or 'sky' and Nigel would take the cue and retrieve one of the many space books that filled his bedroom to read to him.

He and Adam rarely got time alone. When Fane was napping, or at daycare and Nigel had a rare afternoon off. And while both wanted more, wanted the chance to peel the other's clothes away, taste them, bring them pleasure and find it together, they contented themselves with the interaction they were granted.

Mostly, that interaction was on the phone. Adam still hated the phone, but he'd given in when he realized just how little free time they had. Nigel had been incredibly convincing, whispering in Adam's ear after Fane had been put to bed.

"Come on, sweetheart, don't you want to hear what I want to do to you?"

And, well, Adam hadn't had an argument for that.

Nigel was a lot better at it than he was, though. Adam got nervous on the phone, to begin with, and he was never really certain if the things he was saying were 'sexy.'

“I’m wearing pajamas,” he said awkwardly. “They’re blue.”

Nigel laughed. He never sounded mean when he laughed, though. He always sounded like he was laughing *with* Adam, instead of *at* him.

“I can imagine you in blue,” Nigel replied, settling lower in his own bed. The lamp was on, and the monitor he still kept in Fane’s room just in case flickering once in a while in the corner. It was rare for Fane to wake up in the night, now, but old habits died hard. “I’d work the buttons open, kissing the skin that peeked through as I went. All the way down,” he took a breath, released it, listening to Adam swallow on the other end of the line.

“I’m ticklish.”

Nigel grinned. “Are you?”

“Don’t - I didn’t tell you that, that’s not important.”

“That’s *very* important, darling, that means I can tease you with kisses and licks until you’re squirming for me. But I’d hold you down, I think. Just enough. See how far down my mouth could get before you made those soft little noises I like so much.”

Adam made one, just then, as though on cue, and Nigel dropped a hand between his legs with a sigh. “That’s it, baby,”

Adam hesitated over a response. He’d unbuttoned his shirt, following the ideas Nigel was suggesting, and he had a hand resting just over his stomach, where he’d imagined Nigel’s mouth would be. “I think I’d want you to take off your shirt, too. It’s not fair otherwise.”

“Isn’t it?” Nigel asked him, “What if I want to take you apart for a bit, first?”

“But I’d want to see you,” Adam argued. “...Please?” It came out a little too soft, a little too high pitched. He had no idea what he was doing, but Nigel made a noise that sounded something like a growl.

“Fuck, yeah, how’m I gonna tell you no when you sound so sweet?” There was a rustling of fabric in the speaker as Nigel removed what was probably just an undershirt. Adam knew he had chest hair, he’d seen it peeking out of some of Nigel’s lower-collared shirts, and he realized that if he was *there* he would actually be able to see it, run his fingers through it. Adam bit back a moan.

“Pants, too?”

“Boxers,” Nigel corrected, “And yeah, baby, but only if you let me strip you next. Wanna see more of that soft skin.”

“Okay,” breathy, quiet, and Nigel had to bite his lip as he closed his eyes and continued to stroke himself, a slow and deliberate pull of pleasure as he listened to the soft noises Adam made through the phone.

“I’ll bet you’re all proper, too, aren’t you darling? Underwear on under those pajamas. Cute little Y-fronts.”

“How did -”

Nigel laughed, then, just a single bark of delighted sound. “Do you really? Fuck, Adam, you’ll do me the fuck in before I get to actually see them.”

“They’re just underwear,” Adam mumbled, but Nigel could hear the smile in his tone, could feel the warmth in it as Adam let himself get more into their game.

“Mmm and they’ll be great to tease you through,” Nigel told him. “With my hands first, I think, feeling how your cock presses up against the fabric. You’re getting hard already, aren’t you? Thinking about me doing this?”

Adam swallowed. It was answer enough.

“Then I’d press my tongue up against the head, just - there - to feel it twitch, wet the fabric with my spit, see you outlined underneath… so fucking hot for me, baby, you have no idea -”

“Papa?”

Nigel almost fell off the bed, he was surprised he was still on it, when he regained at least some blood to his head again. Fane was leaning in the doorframe rubbing his eyes and Nigel stared at him a moment before forcing his breathing to ease and his eyes to relax from their deer-in-the-headlights look.

“Yeah buddy?” he could hear Adam’s voice tinny through the phone, hoped he wouldn’t hang up. Fane just blinked at him then turned to go back to bed, acknowledgement received, attention gained. Nigel cursed softly, body shaking with adrenaline, and brought the phone to his ear again.

“Good thing I made you wait to take my pants off, huh,” he mumbled.

Adam’s nervous laughter was still fucking beautiful. “I think we’re done for the night, Nigel.”

“Yeah,” Nigel said mournfully, glancing back towards the doorway. There was no guarantee that Fane wouldn’t wake again, now that he’d been up once.

“I have some free time tomorrow?”

“God, please,” Nigel breathed.

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Not every day was a good day. Some days Nigel felt like they’d stepped back to the beginning. But he knew, now, how to help Fane when the world was too loud, or too bright, or too crowded. And Fane could tell Nigel just a little bit more about his needs, even if speech was still far beyond him.

Fane's birthday came on a sunny day late in April. Nigel had been trying to get him excited about it, but Fane had no real concept of time, and he didn't really seem to understand that something exciting was happening 'soon.'

It seemed weird to be doing this without Gabi. It was nothing major. A day out at the playground, a few presents, a cake. They weren't even having guests. But for the first time in a while, Nigel felt her absence keenly, not for himself, but for Fane.

And then Adam showed up, and Fane's face lit up, and Nigel thought that maybe, Fane would be okay.

They had a picnic under one of the big trees in the park, far enough away from the playground that joyful shrieks of other kids didn't bother them, close enough that should Fane want to go back and play, it wouldn't be a trudge.

Fane's cake was in the shape of a rocket, with star sprinkles on the white icing. Five glittery blue candles on top, that Adam and Nigel blew out for him when he didn't seem to know what to do. He knew what to do with the cake, though.

Nigel had given Fane his presents at home; some new clothes since he'd outgrown a lot of the things he and Gabi had bought him, the first of many growth spurts kicking in, books about space and the stars and trains, a night light that projected stars to Fane's ceiling like the show at the observatory. Nigel was sure that he wouldn't see this day as different to any other. He took the presents as a given, but Nigel was okay with that.

When he'd asked Fane for a hug, signing the word for it, he very seriously held his arms out until Nigel picked him up for a cuddle, and pressed his face to Nigel's neck as he hugged him back.

But Adam had brought him a present too.

"This was something that helped me a lot," he admitted, setting the box in front of Fane and letting him decide if he wanted to rip the paper off to work it carefully free. "I didn't get one til I was a teenager, but the sooner you start, the better the effects, I think."

Within the box was what looked like a huge quilt, covered in stars and moons and sleepy planets. But when Nigel reached in to take it up, it was a lot heftier than it should have been.

"Weighted blanket," Adam explained, helping him take it out and spread it on the grass. "It's something to help him feel secure. It's like a hug that doesn't stop, and without human contact if he's not feeling up for it that day."

Fane reached for one of the stars, hand caught quickly by Adam. Nigel watched as Adam deftly cleaned him up with a baby wipe from the diaper bag, as if he'd done it a thousand times before, as if he'd been doing it for five years and not a few months.

"There you go," Adam told him softly, "Go ahead."

‘Thank you’ was still a work in progress. Fane sprawled over the blanket, running his fingers curiously over the edges of the shapes, following lines of stitches and feeling out the fabrics with his palms. He reached for one of the edges, hefting it over himself with a surprised grunt. His eyes peered out from underneath, giving Adam a slightly accusing look.

“It’s supposed to be heavy,” Adam assured him, “But you remember how to ask for help, right?”

Fane unrolled himself, signing ‘help’ distractedly. He’d remembered the cake, and he turned on Nigel. “Mo?” he asked, signing eagerly. “Peez,” he added, rubbing a palm over his chest.

Nigel couldn’t help himself, he laughed, cutting off another small piece for Fane to enjoy. The sugar would get to him, would send him zooming about until he collapsed in a pile of sleepy limbs that hopefully would settle into a nap without incident. But until then… it was his birthday.

“Yeah, buddy, you can have a bit more. You’re welcome.” Nigel signed the words along with saying then, watched Fane dig into his cake with eagerness, while at the same time squirming back on his butt to sit on the new blanket Adam had given him.

For a moment, Nigel wondered why he wanted to cry.

Because Gabi wasn’t here to celebrate their son’s birthday, because she hadn’t been in touch, at all, since she’d left her note and bailed. He’d only learned from her mother that she wasn’t hurt or dead in a ditch somewhere. She “just needed time”, apparently.

But the feeling that overwhelmed him now wasn’t sadness, it was the opposite. Watching Adam draw up his knee and set his cheek against it as he watched Fane eat his birthday cake, watching Fane grin and turn to look at him when he sensed the attention. He was making progress in leaps and bounds, now, even if it seemed like the slowest of pushes from the outside.

And all thanks to Adam.

Nigel sat a bit closer, leaning in to nose behind Adam’s ear until he grinned and tried to squirm away, settling still when Nigel rested an arm around him.

“Thank you,” he whispered, kissing Adam’s cheek.

Adam’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t… I didn’t do anything?”

“You did,” Nigel told him, “You did so *much*. You put us back together.”

Adam turned in Nigel’s arms, pressing a kiss of his own against the corner of Nigel’s mouth. “You would have figured things out.”

“No, Adam, you don’t get it. I worked evenings, I’d never been the one to be home, or taking Fane to therapy. I had no clue what I was doing, and then you…”

“You would have figured it out,” Adam said firmly. “You’re a good father, Nigel, and you *want* to learn. You would have talked to Fane’s therapists or his teachers, and you would have figured it out.”

Nigel pressed his lips against Adam’s temple, taking a deep breath. “I’m glad it was you, anyway,” He said softly. “Fane loves you. *I*... I…”

Adam was smiling when he pulled back. “I love you too, Nigel.” He said, saving Nigel from his own stammering. Nigel pulled him in for a kiss. Just a quick one, just a chaste brush of lips-

“Papa!” It could have been either of them who’d prompted that offended shriek. They both turned to Fane, who was glaring at them, frosting smeared around his mouth. ‘Kiss.’ He signed. ‘Kiss.’ ‘Me.’ ‘Me.’ ‘Me.’ The insistence continued until Nigel laughed, and Adam pulled himself out of his arms to come around to Fane’s side.

‘Kiss,’ Fane demanded again, his stubborn glare not fading until Adam kissed his sticky cheek. “No Papa,” He said aloud. “Fay.”

“Yes,” Nigel drawled, “All the kisses and hugs are for Fane. And none for poor Papa.”

“Good.” Fane replied decisively, grinning when Nigel snorted and shook his head. He signed ‘kiss’ again, watched Nigel until he too crawled over and kissed him, humming in consideration before drawing his tongue in a lick over his boy’s face. Fane shrieked in joy and shoved against Nigel’s side, giggling as Nigel gently pushed him down and pretended to eat him up as Fane squealed and wriggled.

Maybe he would have figured it out. It didn’t matter. They were here now, where more days were good than bad, where Fane had more ways to communicate than trying to utter words he didn’t understand, where Adam was part of their messy little family.

And that, Nigel thought, really *was* good.

End Notes

This was an interesting topic for us, because we have some experience with children like this, and while our own mental health struggles may be different to Fane's, we were able to relate to him more and more as we went on. It was also really important to us to make the characters, interactions, and Fane's journey as believable as possible. We did some research, used personal experience, and hope you like it as much as we do!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!